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## **Children schooled in climate terror**

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### **Body**

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A Toronto mother says a confusing school presentation involving teen activist Greta Thunberg and a ticking clock left her young daughter fearing Earth's imminent demise, and schools should be more careful about what they're teaching seven-year-olds.

At least one child yelled "I don't wanna die" during a presentation on climate change delivered to a Grade 2/3 class on Oct. 4. A group of seven- and eight-year-olds had gathered in the library of Elmbank Junior Middle Academy in Etobicoke to watch a video of a speech Greta delivered at the UN Climate Action Summit on Sept. 23.

In her remarks, a visibly upset Greta accuses world leaders of failing future generations, ignoring climate change and stealing her childhood.

"People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing," she says. "We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

After Greta's five-minute speech, a large carbon clock was displayed on the projector screen, counting down from eight years - the estimated amount of time it will take to emit enough carbon to warm the world by 1.5 degrees Celsius, according to the Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change. The clock can be modified to display 26 years, the estimated amount of time left to avoid 2 C of warming.

Lejla Blazevic says her daughter Joylaea, 8, came home that day confused and scared.

"She's like, 'Mommy, they said that we're going to die in eight years,'" Blazevic said.

"They were terrified with the information."

Blazevic says her daughter remembers her friend yelling out "I don't wanna die," and then the rest of the class joining in. However, TDSB spokesman Ryan Bird said it was one student who made the remark during the presentation, and the teacher immediately told the class that wasn't true. The teacher later followed up with the child and his parents to make sure everything was OK, Bird said.

"We were assured from the family that indeed he was just joking," Bird said.

But Blazevic says her daughter took the remark - and the dire warning in the "developmentally inappropriate" presentation - to heart.

Elizabeth Allured, a New York psychologist and co-president of Climate Psychology Alliance North America, agreed that the presentation could have been intense for an eight-year-old.

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"Are they supposed to feel empowered by Greta or are they supposed to feel that she's telling them that their lives are going to be terrible?" Allured said. "I think (the ticking clock) just scares children - and understandably."

Instead, children at that age should be given hope and taught things that they can do in their own lives to make a positive impact on the environment.

"Children need to know that there is a way to resolve this problem, rather than thinking that we're all doomed. I don't think that we're doomed if we take the appropriate actions," Allured said. Children "need an approach that focuses on the wonderful aspects of our ecosystem, and how it supports us, and how it's currently very bounteous in most of our lives."

The school librarian, Timothy Du Vernet, told Blazevic, in an email provided to the National Post, that the presentation was meant to inspire students.

"The 'message' of her speech for our students was that they can make a difference and the future of our planet concerns our children most directly," he wrote. "It was not the intention to cause distress in our students. Climate change issues are facing all of us. (Joylaea)'s concerns and fears are the very reason we need to respond."

Robert Gifford, a professor of psychology and environmental studies at the University of Victoria, said contextualizing the presentation could help soften the effects of the message. But for the average eight-year-old, it was probably "inappropriate."

"We know at all ages, actually - not just children - very extreme presentations can cause ... a reaction against the message," Gifford said. "A good message for children ... is to counteract the idea that it's hopeless."

It's not just children who are at risk of becoming anxious over the perceived threat of climate change. A growing number of psychologists are reporting cases of what's been dubbed "eco-anxiety," "eco-paralysis" or "environmental grief."

Gifford said it's better to tell people what they can do within their limits. For an eight-year-old, that might mean taking charge of the recycling.

"I do think Greta is on the right track for the right audience," Gifford said. "She was talking to policymakers. If there's a person who maybe was a little bit off base here, it would have been the teacher showing it to eight-year-olds."

Blazevic said after multiple meetings with the principal, she is still not sure what the school has done. Bird said the presentation was discussed with the class after Blazevic raised concerns, and the school has not received any other complaints.

An email from executive superintendent Sandy Spyropoulos, which Blazevic shared with the Post, says that 69 children in three classes, ages seven to 13, watched the presentation.

"We depend on the expertise of our teachers and staff to be able to talk with students in an age-appropriate way," Bird said. "I think there is a fine balance."

Blazevic said she is worried that other children might still be struggling to cope, but not have told anyone.

"I understand they're going to be teaching about climate change," Blazevic said, adding she had previously discussed the topic with her daughter.

"But they have to have some kind of guidelines and some kind of limit as to what they're going to show seven-year-olds."

## Graphic

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Peter J Thompson, National Post; Eight-year-old Joylaea Blazevec came home from school confused and frightened after seeing a presentation on climate change, her mother says.;

## Classification

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